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Life in Motor City: Detroit Getting Smaller ... but Better

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I get tired of all the negative Detroit news.

In the wake of the U.S. Census report that the **population of Detroit had dropped 25% in 10 years**, because I live nearby, *WalletPop* asked me to write about what's driving people out of the city and what it's going to take to get them back.

I don't know. Lots of brilliant people and some not so smart ones have mulled that question and come up dry. The city remains beat up and beat down.

But I do offer one caveat: On its worst day, Detroit is not as bad as most news reports filed here and elsewhere would lead you to believe.

My husband and I moved to the Detroit area 12 years ago from New Jersey. Friends who knew Detroit only from watching TV warned us before we moved that we were going to be mugged -- or worse.





We got here and discovered that no one was hiding in the shrubbery ready to attack. And compared to New Jersey where we were used to being mugged by the property tax collector, the bills were so low that we overpaid them for a couple of years before the nice woman in the assessors office pointed out that we were paying the investor rate instead of the homeowner rate, and adjusted them further downward. Stupid us.

We bought a home in an inner-ring suburb, adjacent to the Detroit city limits, and acquired season tickets for the Lions and the Tigers -- something we'd never been able to do as fans of the Phillies and the Eagles. We bought a boat and a second home on the Detroit River, close enough to the city center that we could see the GM Towers. The water is clean and the walleye abundant. What's not to like?

In 2008, when the economy tanked. We watched our property values slide and some of our neighbors lose their jobs. It was unsettling but on the worst day, our view of it never approximated the overwhelmingly negative reports that we heard and read in the media both here and elsewhere. This **Canadian news report** is particularly bleak. No wonder the population of the city is declining. People see and read this kind of stuff and believe it.

I was talking to someone in the real estate industry in California a few months ago. When I told him I lived in Metro Detroit, he asked me if my house was for sale for \$50. I assured him no. In fact, last week, my husband and I put our house on the market for about 4,000 times that and signed a sales contract in two days. Down from what we might have sold it for five years ago, but not bad in any economy and very good for us as we embark on building a new retirement home on the banks of the Detroit River with a pristine view of bald eagles nesting and **short drive** to my favorite city restaurant.

None of the post-RoboCop reports adequately explain why the recent census headcount in Detroit recorded a total population of 713,777 in 2010, down 25% from 951,270 in 2000. They fail because it's complicated, and it's also hard to talk about while tip-toeing around the racial issues, which almost everybody feels compelled to do.

I'm no sociologist or demographer, but I do live here and here are some of the things that seem to me to be misunderstood particularly often by both well-meaning people and by those who are just looking for a sensational story.

- The city is actually becoming more diverse. Census researchers create an "index of dissimilarity" for every region in the country. Anything about 60 is considered segregated. In 2010 Detroit scored a 74, which doesn't sound great, but it's down substantially from the 84.9 it scored in 2000 and significantly below its 87.6 score in 1990. A score of 70 makes it less segregated than Chicago and New York City.
- Part of the reason that the city is more diverse is the exodus of African-Americans moving to the suburbs. But another factor is the influx of new residents, including young, well-educated Caucasians and Asians searching for affordable city life. More than 2,000 college-educated people between the ages of 25 and 35 moved to the city since 2000, according to analysis of Census data by Impresa Inc., an economic consulting firm.
- Also having an impact on the flavor of the city are Hispanics, who have taken over the southwestern quadrant of the city and turned it into Mexican Town, a cosmopolitan restaurant and entertainment center. I'm especially fond of the **bakeries** that have opened.

Another consideration: This is how gentrification starts. Young families start moving back into blighted neighborhoods, a critical mass is reached, then the whole thing turns around and suddenly you're sitting on some valuable real estate Just ask anyone who bought a dilapidated brownstone in Brooklyn 20 years ago.

In the meantime, a lot of well-meaning money is moving into Detroit. Kurt Metzger, director of **Data Driven Detroit**, a regional data collection service, says the **recently publicized \$1 million** from Bank of America to demolish abandoned properties is a small part of it. **Millions** from such sources as the Taubman Center, the Skillman Foundation and the **Kresge Foundation** are focused on the cause. If charity can revive a city, then this could work.

If I had the option of spending a fortune on the city, I'd focus my millions on the waterfront. It's a **magnificent resource**. A few years ago, the city tried to aggregate property to create an entertainment center with three casinos and failed to be able to either condemn or buy enough acreage. But it has made **some progress**, making at least a portion of the riverfront appealing.

It's more evidence that smaller is better in Detroit and who knows, maybe a limited rescue effort will be enough to anchor a much larger revival.

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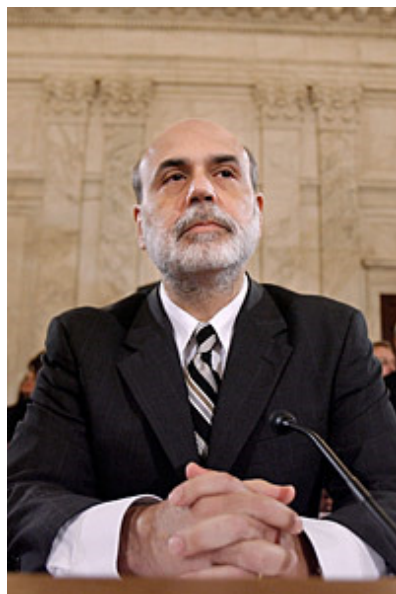
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